



The Government Administration and Elections Committee

Public Hearing, February 22, 2016

Office of Consumer Counsel

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Testimony of Elin Swanson Katz

Proposed SB-104, *An Act Establishing the State Civic Network*

The Office of Consumer Counsel (OCC) has carefully reviewed Proposed Senate Bill (S.B) No. 104, *An Act Establishing the State Civic Network*, and supports the bill.

While state government activities have become ever more important, the revolution in news media (print, broadcast and even digital) has greatly reduced the number of reporters on the state government beat, thus diminishing citizen access to their government. However, since a thriving democracy requires citizen access to information relating to their government, access that is ideally broad and unfettered, the OCC has supported and continues to support the efforts of CT-N to increase its scope and reach.

The proposed State Civic Network will be a nonpartisan e-government access system that will provide all citizens with live and archival access to state activities, including for instance, legislative debates, court arguments, state agency meetings, and press conferences. Best of all, the proposal will create a permanent and searchable online library of public documents and visual recordings of state government events that would be of great use both to the public and to the elected officials who serve them.

Through the federal Cable Act, state authorities such as the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) have the power to require the cable companies to support this type of state public policy programming by passing through the costs- probably less

than \$0.50 per month - to subscribers and providing a distribution channel on their existing lineup. The OCC questions whether PURA needs to develop "regulations" prior to the proposed process beginning since we believe any requirements can be more efficiently handled through a PURA docket.

The OCC is statutorily mandated to carefully analyze the implementation of any new charge (or continuation of existing charges) on the state's utility ratepayers. The OCC has therefore evaluated this call for another line item on ratepayers of cable operator services. PEG programming in general is either available via cable operator services or via streaming from the Internet, so the most likely beneficiaries of the services of the proposed State Civic Network are already cable operator customers. Since we believe this proposal is a vital component of e-government services going forward, we accordingly support the proposed funding mechanism.

Last year, the General Assembly created the State Broadband Office, within the OCC, in order to advance the stated public policy goals of the state to excel among all states in availability of low cost, high-speed Internet access to all residents and businesses. SB-104 demonstrates the ever-increasing demand for services and applications that can only flourish if delivered via a robust fiber network. The critical need for state and local action to stimulate competition and drive construction of fiber network access across Connecticut is only made more urgent by the efforts of our neighboring state governments such as New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont to rapidly develop competing fiber networks that Connecticut does not possess.

In February 2014, Governor Malloy launched the state Open Data initiative to make state agency data available to analysts, academics, entrepreneurs and all members of the public for innovative purposes, including the ability to visualize data through graphs, charts, and on maps. Together with the proposed State Civic Network, the state Open Data initiative both strive to create "goldmines" of data for public use, such digitally accessible data and information collections are wholly dependent on access to a robust statewide fiber network that is also available at reasonable costs to all citizens.

Thus, the OCC supports SB-104 and also urges the General Assembly to support ongoing efforts to develop a statewide fiber network upon which the vital e-government activities that will be broadcast and archived may be best utilized by all of the state's citizens.